

*By BARBARA S. ROTHSCILD*

*Courier-Post Staff*

Christmas and Hanukkah hues were part of the palette at a Sharp Elementary School assembly Tuesday morning, but the most important colors on display were the red, white and blue that stand for the United States of America.

Patriotism was the main order of the day as students presented hundreds of holiday cards to Rep. John H. Adler, D-N.J., who is taking a winter break from Capitol Hill. The Cherry Hill resident is delivering the cards -- crafted by Sharp students and others from schools throughout the district -- to patients at the Philadelphia VA Medical Center today.

Adler, in turn, had a much-appreciated gift for the school -- an American flag that flew over the Capitol Building on Nov. 17 at the congressman's request, and will now fly over Sharp.

"Look at that flag. Look at what it represents -- freedom and democracy," Adler told the students.

He added that some of the veterans he'll see at the VA Medical Center today today were injured in recent tours of Iraq and Afghanistan.

"I know you liked the freedom of being off from school yesterday," Adler told the students, referring to Monday's snow day.

"But that's not real freedom," he said. "Real freedom is what (our soldiers) fight for every day . . . When you see a veteran, thank that veteran."

Principal Robert Homer led the students in special thanks to Richard Mann, the Sharp physical education teacher who organized Tuesday's event. Mann, a former Marine, is a Vietnam veteran who lost many of his comrades in an attack that occurred while he was on leave for his father's funeral.

Mann said the inspiration for Tuesday's assembly came from a memory that is more than 30 years old. He remembered teaching back then at another Cherry Hill school whose flag had once flown over the U.S. Capitol.

"Since then, it's been one of my goals to have a flag that flew over the Capitol come to my school," Mann said.

Sharp already has a very special American flag on display in its lobby. That Stars and Stripes flew over Marine Air Control Squadron 2 Headquarters in Iraq on June 19, 2007.

Adler, who has two sons in college and two still attending Cherry Hill schools, answered students' questions about his time in Washington, D.C. He stays there during work weeks, working out in the gym by 6:30 a.m., holding meetings in his office all day, and going to the Capitol building to vote two or three times -- a schedule so tiring that he is in bed by 9 p.m.

The Harvard College and Law School graduate said he became a congressman because of his own life story. Growing up in Haddonfield, Adler was still in high school when his father, a dry cleaner, died. Social Security got his family through rough times.

"I know what government can do to help people achieve their individual dreams," he said.

Adler also talked about his visit to Afghanistan in late October to meet with the troops.

"It was not an easy decision to send men and women to fight. The good guys die, too. But we are fighting what I think is a correct war," he said.

After Sharp's second-graders sang "God Bless the USA" and there was a moment of silence for all the veterans who made the greatest sacrifice so that America could be free and students gave a huge cheer.

"I feel honored that we get this flag that flew over the Capitol Building," said fifth-grader Kaitlyn Johnson, 11, who helped accept the flag from Adler.

Added fifth-grader Sarah Vetesi, 10, "It was inspiring that a congressman came to talk to us about matters of the United States."

Fifth-grader Gabriela Stahl, 10, said she and her family have volunteered making posters in election campaigns and couldn't believe it when Mann tapped her to play a role in Tuesday's assembly.

"It was inspiring to learn how people changed the United States of America," Gabriela said.

Said Adler, "It's great that the kids get it, and that they want to be enthusiastic about America."